
LESSONS IN LIVING

For Everything, There Is a Season

A St. Andrew's Sermon
Delivered by Dr. Jim Rigby
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Scripture Reading: Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

There are a lot of people that find the book of Ecclesiastes depressing. That is understandable. Ecclesiastes has always been one of my favorite books in the Bible. I think part of it is having a heretic right there in the middle of the Bible. I like that. The Ten Commandments say "Thou shall not kill" and Ecclesiastes says "Yeah, but sometimes you have got to." It says there is a time for every purpose under heaven. Jesus looks and says "consider the birds of the air how God takes care of them" and Ecclesiastes says "Yeah, well *there* is a dead bird and *there* is a dead bird." I think what is happening is that Ecclesiastes doesn't mean to discourage us but does want to disillusion us. Because as good as it feels to do pretend religion - where we work ourselves up to be inspired and that kind of thing - ultimately we come back to reality.

Ecclesiastes, which means "the preacher," realizes that unrealistic religion can cave in on people very quickly and at the worst possible times. But a faith that is built on reality and finding the sacred in the ordinary is almost invulnerable when it comes to things like despair. I have known a lot of people who have "lost it" at the end of life when their religion had been about omens and whispers in the ear, but people who had lived everyday rejoicing in the sunrise and sunset and seeing the sacred in the ordinary, it was there for them at the last. I have been by people's beds and read this passage and I don't know why it works so powerfully for people. It is just a set of opposites. I don't necessarily see the inspiration there, but it is amazing to see people just sigh in peace from it. I think it must be like when you are a kid and you are swimming, and you can touch the ground underneath your feet. You have this horrible feeling when you are in over your head, but when you can feel the ground underneath you there is a sense of orientation. What Ecclesiastes does is touch us up against reality. It says it is going to be okay there, too.

Like everything else in the universe Ecclesiastes has three points. I don't know if you have noticed that, but every other book, movie, scripture breaks down to three points. It is amazing how that works isn't it? You may come up with more or different points but the way I want to summarize Ecclesiastes for our purposes this morning is that, in life, you will run into three different seasons. There are *seasons that teach you*. Those are the seasons of wisdom. There are *times of joy* when you are not necessarily learning anything, but you are just being glad to be alive, and then there are *times of duty, times of courage* when you are not learning anything, and you are not enjoying it, but you just have to endure. I think what Ecclesiastes is saying is that you are probably going to find yourself in one of those seasons. Accept that and realize the importance of every one of those. Now we are going to go through each one.

First is the idea that there are times of wisdom. Someone like Ecclesiastes believed that life teaches us. Nature teaches us. Experience teaches us. We are born with information in our bodies. He believed this type of thinking. Nature does not speak directly to us in English, but if you will learn its language it will

speak to you everyday. Have you had that experience - that every animal speaks, but it speaks in its own language? Ecclesiastes is saying that Nature has a language, too. The bad news is that it is not going to change the clock for you; that is the bad news Ecclesiastes is saying. You may want a different universe, but you are not going to get one according to Ecclesiastes. Now we all know better right? If you pray right, the periodic table will bend to your will. If you fall off a building, the laws of gravity will give if you are spiritual enough. What Ecclesiastes is saying is that you will find everything you are looking for in ordinary experience. Life is speaking to you. Human purposes, though, are in many ways chasing after wind. If you want something besides the wisdom, the joy and sense of courage in giving your life, you will wind up chasing after shadows if that is not enough for you. One of the ways the stoics used to say it is "Whatever happens to you, realize it comes from the same principles that gave you birth." To a wisdom teacher, we are part of the whole being. Have you heard the word "cosmopolitan"? Long before it was the name of a magazine, it was a stoic term for somebody who lives in the whole world, including the animals, including the plants. A Cosmopolitan means somebody whose city is the whole world. Did you know that on planet earth there are other tenants besides human beings? Your life will make a lot more sense when you realize there is a balance for all the plants and animals on earth - that it wasn't created as an asphalt playground for human beings. The fact that we try to turn it into that is a problem.

So Ecclesiastes calls us back to wisdom to say the universe will not set its clock to you. In our earlier reading, was that a surprise to you when it stated that it was the 17th century before they invented the minute hand on clocks? It was to me. Because I think how far we have gone from that...from seasons to new moons to iPods to things in our ear to things right in our face that give us an artificial sense of time for who we are. I disagree when people say we need new symbols about computers or artificial intelligence. Rather, I think we need to understand what the original symbols were talking about: our relationship to nature. It may not inspire you to hear about sheep and shepherds and that kind of thing, but if we don't get back to that simplicity we will perish as a species. If we were to turn our religious world view into a computer simulated virtual universe, that might feel really good until somebody or something comes knocking at the door. So Ecclesiastes is saying that the bad news is that the universe does not set its clock to you, but the good news is this: if you will set your clock to reality you will get everything you are looking for in a better form than you would ever imagine it. The wisdom, the courage, the joy will be deeper and more substantive if they are coming from your real experiences. You will feel guided, you will feel clothed, and you will feel all of those things when you are in tune with life and with nature.

The second gift that Ecclesiastes talks about is courage - doing our duty. I've put that second, so that I could save joy 'til last, so you would feel like there is something good coming down the pipeline. (The M&M's are at the end of the tunnel.) "Vanity of vanities; all is vanity." Do we have the courage to realize that nothing we build is permanent? Sort of what is being said there is if you look at time and you realize that it teaches us but it destroys the disc, then you have to realize that the purpose of life cannot be to pile up things. How much of our life is spent as though it were? So even though I don't think Ecclesiastes would say quit your job, dump your family; you have obligations, but realize that your joy, happiness and courage are going to come from something deeper. I think that is important. Plutarch used to say life is the greatest teacher there is, time is the greatest teacher...and another philosopher said "Yeah, but the problem is that it kills all its students." And that is kind of the jolt of reality that Ecclesiastes is trying to give us.

Is anybody here old enough to remember Jiminy Cricket? When I was a kid, Walk Disney had a thing; Jiminy Cricket was my guru.

*"When you wish you upon a star, makes no difference who you are.
Anything your heart desires will come your way."*

What a crock! That little cricket didn't know what it was talking about. (So I guess you shouldn't follow insects in the first place.) Someone has said that Ecclesiastes was the first existentialist. He is going to make things bleaker than they really are - not to keep you from enjoying what is going on, but to teach you not to put your treasure there. There is nothing permanent in your life, but if you give yourself fully to life, there is something eternal being expressed through that ephemeral nature. That is the surprising punch line here.

The thing about this group (the congregation) is that sometimes you can hear Eastern stuff better than Western stuff. This is a copy of a Sanskrit poem, ('cause you are a bunch of hippies...I'm kidding.) Joanna Adams was given this poem which is a two thousand year old Sanskrit poem - translated (for those of you who do not speak Sanskrit.) The people that gave it to her were killed in an airplane crash so she has this in her office. It contains the wisdom of that, but also the poignancy of the reality of her situation. It goes:

Listen to the salutation of the dawn. Look to this day for it is the very life of life. In its brief course lie all the realities and truth of existence. The joy of growth, the splendor of action, the glory of power for yesterday is but a memory and tomorrow a vision; but today well lived makes every yesterday a memory of happiness and every tomorrow a vision of hope.

Now see if Ecclesiastes had written it like that, then people would like Ecclesiastes better. But I think they are saying the same thing. We get so addicted to stimulation that sometimes we need to be jolted to let go of it. Have you ever met an addict that thought they had a problem? Doesn't usually happen does it? They don't have to quit because they don't need it, and they can quit anytime they want or, I should say we can quit, because every one of us is addicted. In this culture we are all addicted to something. So Ecclesiastes speaks very poignantly to us, too.

The reason why this is so important is because the joy he is talking about is real. And it is so much better than the make-believe happiness that we have. The kind of intelligence that speaks through nature is so much better than the Santa Claus God that we think we want, but never seems to show up on time and makes us feel so alone and futile. This is something that is always there whispering. When we don't hear it, it is not because it is not there, but because we are not in tune.

So the joy - let's talk about the joy. A couple of months ago I saw an ice sculpture at a wedding reception. An ice sculpture in Texas is particularly poignant, and I paid so much more attention to it knowing that it was dissolving before my eyes. In this world beauty is like that. Beauty is like that if we realize that what we are loving is something shining through the beauty, something eternal that is being expressed in that ephemeral instant. It is then we get something we don't lose in this world. As long as we think we are piling up treasures, we go from one disappointment to another disappointment.

It is as though we think the problem is the cards we are being dealt. Have you ever known a gambler or a bridge player who talks about the cards they got? If so, you know they have not mastered it. Everybody gets the same cards over time, but do you learn the patterns? That is what Ecclesiastes is talking about, not the kind of religion that needs a different kind of planet to be happy, but the type of religion that maximizes those moments. Wisdom, Courage, Happiness. Don't be the kind of dancer who can never find

the right kind of music. Don't be so fastidious about the company, that you never find a friend in your whole life because you can do that with this planet. It is never perfect. Every pot has a crack in it somewhere if you keep looking.

But if we say “yes” to reality and to ourselves and to other human beings, a miracle does take place which doesn't mean our accomplishments are permanent. “Vanity of vanities; all is vanity.” But we find the beauty by letting go of what we have lost from the past. It is not easy to do, it is not always possible, but it is helpful to know that is what we need to do. When something is gone, find that courage to let go of it and when something is not quite here, find the balance not to reach too hard for it. Realize that in the balance is the joy. Ecclesiastes said the three times are times of wisdom, times of courage, times of happiness but I wouldn't blame you if you enjoyed the Sanskrit version better so I will close with that.

Listen to the salutation of the dawn. Look to this day, for it is the very life of life. In its brief course lie all the realities and truths of existence: the joy of growth, the splendor of action, the glory of power. For yesterday is but a memory and tomorrow a vision but today well lived makes every yesterday a memory of happiness and every tomorrow a vision of hope.

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14311 Wells Port Drive, Austin, Texas 78728 • (512) 251-0698
Fax: (512) 251-2617 www.staopen.com